

ODAN Opus Dei Awareness Network

"You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

ODAN – Inner World of Opus Dei

Testimonies and Other Writings

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The Inner World of Opus Dei

(This story was translated by an ODAN supporter and posted on the www.opuslibros.com website. To read the story in Spanish, click on ["El Mundo Interior del Opus Dei."](#))

by Dr. John Roche, Linacre College, Oxford

I joined Opus Dei as a numerary, or full member, in 1959 while I was a graduate student at Galway University. In 1961 I was asked to go to Kenya to set up and run the physics department of Strathmore College, a pre-university school owned and administered by Opus Dei. I gradually took on further responsibilities, eventually becoming the Warden of the College, and director to most of the members of Opus Dei involved there. I also organised the work with married members of Opus Dei, and set up a boys club. In 1972, after a short period in Spain, I went to Oxford to study. While in England I became increasingly worried by some of the attitudes and activities of Opus Dei in Europe. I kept a diary of events and carefully studied the internal documents of Opus Dei at my disposal. It gradually dawned on me that the ethos of Opus Dei was entirely self-centred, sectarian, and totalitarian, and that it was misleading the Church about important aspects of its character.

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In the summer of 1973 I began to draw up an internal report about Opus Dei. When news of this got to Rome I was asked to discontinue my report, and to hand over what I had written. I refused, and after various admonitions to withdraw my criticisms (not being allowed to see the Constitution of Opus Dei to discover my rights), I was requested to resign from Opus Dei. This I did in November 1973. Before I left I secretly xeroxed or transcribed about 140 editorials of *Cronica*, which is the chief internal magazine of Opus Dei, and which constitutes the main spiritual reading of members of Opus Dei. I made various efforts to draw the attention of the Church to the dangers of Opus Dei but without success. From *The London Times*, of 16 November 1979, I learned with dismay that Opus Dei was attempting to acquire the status of a personal prelature. I wrote to *The Times* and Clifford Longley, the religious affairs correspondent (a Catholic) came to see me, and read my documents. After more than a year of research *The Times* published 'A Profile of Opus Dei' on 12 January 1981 calling for an investigation of Opus Dei by the Church. This was followed by a considerable coverage in the media, during which Cardinal Hume was urged to carry out an investigation of Opus Dei. I submitted my documents to the Cardinal, and it was announced in the press that he would conduct an informal investigation of Opus Dei in his own dioceses. The Cardinal received information about Opus Dei from all over the world and on 2 December 1981 published his guidelines for Opus Dei, which in effect requested Opus Dei to discontinue its practices of the secret recruitment under pressure of children under 18, and not prevent its members from receiving outside spiritual direction, and also not to prevent those from leaving who wished to do so. Opus Dei in England publicly accepted his guidelines but privately criticised and ridiculed the Cardinal. During the past two years, I have heard from, or met, many former members of Opus Dei and parents of present members, who expressed gratitude and relief that at last something was being done about Opus Dei. I have gathered together also a great deal of documentary evidence. I shall attempt to give a brief resume of the information at my disposal and I shall also provide documentary evidence and testimony.

Opus Dei is often accused in the world press of being a political organisation. In accordance with its Constitution is chiefly interested in the governing classes and in it does seek to acquire political influence. But such influence

does not imply a particular political ideology, and in fairness to Opus Dei, during my fourteen years of membership I did not detect any party political intention. Its members do, however, loosely share a spread of political attitudes which vary in emphasis with time and place. These result from its uncompromising anti-communism, its fundamentalist religious outlook, its international business enterprises, and its long affiliation with the business and military classes of Spain. It is therefore, very attractive to the far right. Opus Dei is indeed at bottom a religious organisation, but with various deviant tendencies which I shall attempt to describe.

It is easy to be impressed by Opus Dei, with its beautiful buildings, its energy, its sense of purpose, its likeable, well-dressed members, and its apparent loyalty to traditional catholicism. But this is only one face of Opus Dei. Internally it is totalitarian and imbued with fascist ideas turned to religious purposes, ideas which were surely drawn from the Spain of its early years. It is virtually a sect or cult in spirit, a law unto itself, totally self-centred, grudgingly accepting Roman authority because it still considers Rome orthodox, and because of the vast pool of recruits accessible to it as a respected Catholic organisation. While its founder, ‘the Father’, J.M. Escriva, was alive he was the object of an almost hysterical personality cult deliberately fostered by himself and by the organisation in various ways which included the spreading of whispered stories that he received visitations from the Virgin Mary, the elaborate staging of ‘get-togethers’ with him, and through Opus Dei’s internal publications. As a condition of membership he demanded acceptance that ‘The Work’ was Divinely revealed to him, that it was therefore ‘absolutely perfect’, and that he was infallible in matters of the ‘spirit of the Work’. It is easy to understand why, therefore, it could happen, in 1973, that a senior member of the Work told me that if a choice had to be made he would follow the Father rather than the Pope, since the Founder himself at that time frequently stated that the ‘Church was rotten’ and that ‘he no longer believed in Popes or Bishops.’

Opus Dei has a grotesquely inflated opinion of itself, calling itself “everlasting,” the “predilect of God,” the “Mystical Body,” referring to “the beauty of the Work of God … which is more luminous than ‘the dawn, fair as the Moon, bright as the Sun, terrible as an army with banners.’” Opus Dei

believes that it is the new chosen people, that its founder is a new Abraham, and that it has an “imperative command from Christ” to recruit the rest of the human race, including the Catholic Church, into the organisation. It should be no surprise therefore that its almost exclusive goal is its own aggrandizement through religious, political, and economic influence within the Church and in secular society, and above all by recruitment.

To understand the Work it is necessary to realise that “proselytism” is its driving passion: “University residences, universities, publishing houses ...are these ends? ...no, rather means ...and what is the end? ...to promote the greatest possible number of souls dedicated to God in Opus Dei.” Every school, youth club, cultural centre run by the Work has this goal as its first, hidden, purpose. It has developed a variety of successful techniques to persuade young people to join which are closer in spirit to the methods of the more notorious contemporary cults. “Love-bombing” has long been used, the provision of a total environment, and the gradual alienation from family, friends, and the Church. Young people are often encouraged to join at 14-1/2 years of age and are discouraged from telling their parents. Various methods of “holy coercion” are used in dealing with the reluctant which includes warning them that “not to heed the clear call of God ...can be fatal for the soul... a radical opposition to the Will of God.”

Those who join as celibate “numerary members” live very narrow lives and are worked relentlessly. Every detail of their lives is regimented, they are bound by absolute obedience to their directors who are “almost infallible,” they are taught “to give in to what in their consciences seems to be an error” and “to cede all rights.” They are told that “there is no need to think, everything is written.” and innumerable other techniques of thought-control are used. They are taught that Opus Dei is an “organism,” that only the “whole is efficacious,” that “our ego has died and our only concern is the collective ideal.” Not only are members not allowed to go to the theatre, cinema, or football games, they are only allowed to watch approved television programmes and read a few approved books and newspapers. Their spiritual reading is almost entirely confined to the writings of the founder who is “a latter-day Doctor of the Church,” and from whom these quotations are mostly

drawn. As a result of this many members become depersonalised, stereotyped and shadows of their former selves.

Members are tightly controlled financially, handing over their salaries and being effectively persuaded to make out their wills to Opus Dei seven years after they have joined. Their letters are read, they are subjected to frequent “classes of formation,” weekly “confidences” with their director and a priest, and are coerced into submissive obedience. Some are pressed, against their wills, into becoming priests. Members are trained to appear joyful in their encounters with the public, to declare that they are very happy in Opus Dei, and that Opus Dei is a wonderful family. In fact Opus Dei is harsh and unbalanced, its members are locked into the strange mentality of its founder, and live in a world totally insulated from outside criticism. Many of the ordinary members are sincere though misguided, but the higher the level of government in Opus Dei the more reprehensible its conduct. Most alarmingly, members are cut off from the life, thought, and protection of the Church by the closed self-sufficiency of Opus Dei, by its hostility and contempt for just about every element in the Church, by its effective prohibition of anyone consulting a priest outside Opus Dei, and by its siege mentality.

Opus Dei is supervised internally by its more ardent “inscribed” members who ensure that there is no public criticism within the organisation. Criticism is effectively contained in private discussions with a director. These also see to it that backsliding members receive “holy coercion” to perform the many devotional norms, and ensure that any deviation of conduct, speech or dress is rapidly remedied by means of “fraternal correction.” Members flagellate themselves, wear a spiked chain, and the women sleep on boards nightly, practices no longer recommended by the Church. Members who are thought not to practice sufficient physical self-mortification, or not to be sufficiently active in proselytism are sometimes criticised openly. Opus Dei abounds in stories of the Founder’s bloodied discipline. Women members are not allowed to visit parents, sometimes even when they are dying, and are not allowed to attend family gatherings such as weddings or Christmas or even to sleep at home, causing untold anguish to parents. Members are encouraged to practise the “apostolate of not giving,” which they believe to be a Christian virtue, and which means in practice that they are not allowed to give alms to the Church

or to the poor, are not allowed to give presents to anyone, not even at family weddings and are pressed to cultivate friendships with the wealthy to obtain gifts of money. Members are allowed no holidays, receive no gratitude, are worked relentlessly, and quickly learn the truth of the boast of the Father that “we end up exhausted, squeezed out.” Opus Dei is also anti-intellectual and is virtually without interest in the cultural life of its members. There is anxiety within Opus Dei about all of this, but it has no voice. Both internal and external secrecy are practised, members being supplied with caricatures of outside criticisms. Yet this is what Opus Dei describes to potential recruits as “living as ordinary Christian lay people in the middle of the World.”

Opus Dei is an Orwellian world employing much double-think and internal and external deception. A glossy image has been elaborated for potential recruits, church dignitaries, and the press, which is very misleading. A general rhetoric of self-description has also been developed for internal consumption, safe from the ears of the Church, which applies to Opus Dei every imaginable flattery. The language of practical directives, however, is harsh, and unambiguous. Although it is incompatible with the rhetoric, few realise it. Members who criticize and think of leaving are warned that they risk damnation, are told, untruthfully, that those who leave bitterly regret it, are called traitors, and if they persist are expelled without a penny. As a result there are a lot of very disturbed people in Opus Dei living a kind of horror without escape which only a religious conscience can experience. I know of several cases of virtual house arrest and interrogation and of attempted and perhaps even successful suicides. On the other hand many members of Opus Dei are happy with their way of life, and Opus Dei would still get recruits if it was honest about itself. Most members have a strong sense of belonging and although their thought on many matters becomes stereotyped and partisan, they live in a world of certainties, with a strong sense of loyalty, purpose and support. Those who do leave are sometimes subjected to systematic defamation which also explains why many former members are afraid to speak out. There is much talk of the Devil in Opus Dei; and critics of the organisation, whether in the episcopate or among the laity, are held to be either doing the work of the devil or to be Marxists. Ridicule is also commonly used, a tactic recommended by the Founder. On the other hand physical

violence is not used against its detractors, which is something to be grateful for in an age of violence.

Opus Dei controls a vast multinational business organisation. It has become enormously wealthy through its “Auxiliary societies,” which are economic enterprises controlled by Opus Dei and run by its lay members. Opus Dei’s economic activities have a history of scandals reflecting a very casual internal attitude towards social ethics. Members were encouraged by the Founder to help each other in securing “professional prestige,” and titles and honours sought after as “apostolic bait.” The Founder himself obtained the title of Marquis of Peralta. In pursuit of spreading “the spirit of Opus Dei” everywhere it strives to secure the friendship of, and to “impress” influential lay catholics, politicians, industrialists, and churchmen. All of this is carried out with the utmost “discretion,” members ordinarily being forbidden by their Constitution to reveal to outsiders that they belong to Opus Dei.

Opus Dei invests an enormous effort into spreading an attractive but largely false image of itself in the media. It runs newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, colleges of journalism, a news agency, and it is involved in the cinema and television. Its many journalist members use their influence to give publicity to its official image, to suppress unfavourable articles about Opus Dei, and to persuade apparently uninvolved friends to write “spontaneous” letters defending Opus Dei in stereotyped language. Opus Dei is engaged at present in winning control of various catholic newspapers and magazines. It aims to “drown evil in an abundance of good.” It is fiercely energetic and unremittingly persistent in everything it does.

Opus Dei’s drive to recruit parish clergy, who develop a narrow sectarian commitment, is particularly worrying. They are used by Opus Dei to gather intelligence about local clergy, and Bishops even, which is sent to Rome. Another alarming feature is that it is potentially self-perpetuating. Perhaps three-quarters of its members are married and take partial vows. They learn to regard their membership of Opus Dei “as more important than their wives and children,” and to encourage their children to join the organisation. Opus Dei also has Bishops among its members. In 1973 there was some discussion in

Opus Dei of the possibility of a schism, since the Founder intensely disliked Pope Paul VI and the effects on the Church of the Vatican Council.

Opus Dei at present is engaged in the most ambitious venture of its entire history. It is attempting to push through quickly the canonisation of its Founder as to secure respectability for the organisation. I understand that one of the Devil's Advocates is a priest of Opus Dei. It has recently secured the status of a personal prelature which will give it independence from the local Bishops. Most ambitious of all it is attempting to secure key positions in the government of the Church, with the best intentions of course, just as it virtually took over the government of Spain in the last years of Franco. The personal prelature will allow Opus Dei to spread everywhere ignoring the local bishops. It denies this but its record in telling the truth is poor. Its members will now be even less protected by the Church than they have been, and Opus Dei is one step closer to becoming a sect. Should it gain control over key organs of government of the Church, the spirit of the Vatican Council will be gravely threatened, as also will be the unity and moral integrity of the Church.

What Opus Dei needs is not more independence but more control by the Church. It is high time a full investigation was carried out into what is to some degree a malignant growth within the Church.

Written 7 September 1982

Posted to website September 11, 2002

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